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How Chen Shui-bian Won: The 2004 Taiwan Presidential Election and Its Implications

— VINCENT WEI-CHENG WANG —

Election, Democratic Deepening, and Strategic Implications

The year 2004 is the year of elections. In addition to America's race for the White House, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan all have national elections to replace their executives or legislators. But of these, only Taiwan's (the official name remains Republic of China, ROC for short) March 20 presidential election, combined with a first-ever nationwide referendum, meant high-stake international consequences involving two nuclear giants – the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China).

With Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian's campaign focusing on a distinctive "Taiwan identity" and calling for direct democracy to deepen Taiwan's democracy, China equated Chen's electioneering with Taiwan independence. This it had vowed to crush with force. Meanwhile, the U.S. eagerly sought to defuse tensions and avoid a military conflict in the Taiwan Strait at a time when its resources were stretched thin by Iraq and the anti-terror war.

The 2004 election marked only the third time that Taiwan voters chose their head of state, a choice never given to those who have in the past and who now live in mainland China. A year earlier, in 2003, Chen's reelection prospects appeared bleak. In 2000, facing a divided opposition, he won with only 39 percent of the vote. But this time Chen faced a united ticket, consisting of Lien Chan, Chairman of the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party, usually called the KMT), who polled 23.1 percent in 2000, and James Soong, Chairman of the People First Party (PFP), who garnered 37.6 percent in 2000. The combined ticket, generally referred to as Pan-Blue, made Lien-Soong the odds-on favorites. The Chen-Lu ticket, supported by the Taiwan

Solidarity Union (TSU) as well as by Chen's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) is referred to as Pan-Green.

Aside from the year 2000 numbers, the performance of Chen's novice administration, ranging from his dealing with the economy, to management of cross-strait relations or international space, was largely mediocre. Initially the Chen administration blamed the intractable parliamentary opposition (which in fact held the majority of seats) and the downturn in international markets for his problems. But as time went on, voters became less sympathetic to his claims. The Pan-Blue election strategy thus sought to capitalize on Chen's weakness and present itself as a more experienced alternative. After all, the KMT had governed Taiwan for fifty years before being defeated by Chen in 2000.

Chen's reelection bid appeared to suffer a further blow when U.S. President George W. Bush publicly rebuked him for some of his reelection tactics in front of the visiting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao on December 9, 2003. Bush declared:

The United States government's policy is one China, based upon the three communiqués and the *Taiwan Relations Act*. We oppose any unilateral decision by either China or Taiwan to change the status quo. And the comments and actions made by the leader of Taiwan indicate that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally to change the status quo, which we oppose.¹

Searching for a way to mobilize his base and increase his vote, Chen had called for a "defensive referendum" on relations with China to be conducted on the same day of the presidential election. Although the questions were rather anodyne (see Note 4 below), they were seen in both Washington and Beijing as possibly forming a precedent for deciding on a future new constitution, and therefore as a dangerous precursor to a declaration of Taiwan independence. The U.S. also feared that with China outraged, the situation could spin out of control and sought to rein in Chen.

Given all these factors, most analysts, including the respected *Economist* Intelligence Unit, wrote Chen off, and most polls, except the DPP internal polls, predicted a Pan-Blue win.

But the resilient Chen proved everybody wrong. He won a second term, albeit by a mere 0.2 percent (50.1 percent vs. 49.9 percent), or 29,518 votes out of a total of 12.91 million votes cast (the voter turnout was 80.3 percent). The Pan-Blues challenged the results in the streets and in the court. They questioned the suspicious circumstances sur-

1. The White House, "President Bush and Premier Wen Jiabao Remarks to the Press." Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/12/20031209-2.html>.

rounding the election-eve shooting incident, which slightly injured Chen and his running mate Vice President Annette Lu, and the large number of ballots counted as invalid.

Most analysts believe that a court-ordered recount (still continuing as this is written) in the end will reaffirm the results. But how can Chen's improbable victory be explained?

Explaining the Improbable

There can be no question as to the significance of Chen's reelection. Critics argued that Chen lacked a true mandate since his victory in 2000 was due to a split opposition, which together garnered more votes than he. But now Chen received a majority in a two-way race. When Lien and Soong joined hands in early 2003, polls showed Chen trailing by 15-20 percent. Yet, as the election ended, he gained 1.49 million more votes than last time, an increase of more than 10 percent. What explained his dramatic comeback?

The most important reason was that Chen ran an excellent campaign. His strategy focused on appropriating the so-called Taiwan identity (or Taiwan-first consciousness) and controlling the agenda. The Table below shows that a clear cultural revolution has occurred on Taiwan's political scene during the past decade – contemporaneous with Taiwan's democratization. More and more people identify themselves as "Taiwanese" or "both Taiwanese and Chinese." Between 1992 and 2003, those who identified themselves as "Chinese" dropped from 26.2 percent to 7.7 percent, whereas those who identified themselves as "Taiwanese" rose from 17.3 percent to 43.2 percent – an all-time high and even higher than "both Taiwanese and Chinese."

Table 1 : National Identity Distributions (percentages)

Select poll dates	I am Taiwanese	I am both Taiwanese and Chinese	I am Chinese	Missing Data*
Jun 1992	17.3	45.4	26.2	11.0
Jun 1996	23.1	50.9	15.8	10.2
Jun 2000	36.9	43.8	13.1	6.2
Dec 2001	43.2	41.8	10.3	4.7
Dec 2003	43.2	42.9	7.7	6.3

* Missing data includes "do not know," "no response," etc.

Source: National Chengchi University Election Study Center data.

In other words, in Taiwan, the process of democratization has been accompanied by a cultural movement – indigenization, or to use an easier term, Taiwanization. Cultural practices such as the increased emphasis of Taiwanese, rather than Chinese, history and geography in textbooks, the increased use of the Minnan language rather than Mandarin² in daily discourse and political campaigning, and other moves aimed at desinification, such as the so-called zheng-ming – Rectify (Taiwan's) name – campaign, worked in that direction. So did a shared memory that was partially shaped by the PRC's intimidation and oppression, partially by years of discrimination practiced against them by the mainlanders who fled to Taiwan along with Chiang Kai-shek in 1949. These things gave rise to a new sense of identity among those born on the island, and especially among those whose grandparents and great grandparents had been born there as well. These Taiwanese quite naturally saw "Chinese" as the opposing "other" and this became the psychological foundation for a nascent new nation – Taiwan – as a newly formed "imagined community."

Chen's strategy reflected his understanding of two basic premises: (1) The 2004 election is not just about democratic consolidation; it also marks a step forward in nation-building. (2) A majority of the electorate will support the party that embodies this Taiwan identity.

Chen believed that the DPP's 1999 *Resolution on Taiwan's Future* captured the sentiment or awareness of most people on Taiwan, that the main ideas of the document have become mainstream values in Taiwan. Many of his actions appeared to have been guided by the *Resolution*.

The *Resolution* maintains that as a result of Taiwan's political reform and democratic elections since the mid-1980s, Taiwan "has in reality already become a democratic independent country." It asserts that Taiwan is a sovereign independent state whose territory extends only to Taiwan, Penghu, Jinmen, Mazu, and associated islands and their adjacent waters. "Taiwan, although its name is the Republic of China according to the current constitution, does not belong to the PRC" and "any alteration of this separate status must be decided by all the inhabitants in Taiwan through a referendum."

Having established his party as a "Taiwan-first" party and branded the Pan-Blue as "China-first," Chen seized the agenda from the opposition: his statement that there now existed "one country on

2. Mandarin, or Kuo Yu (National Speech) is the official language of China and was for Taiwan as well during the period of KMT rule on the island. In fact, Minnan, the language spoken by most ethnic Taiwanese once was banned from use in schools. But that ban has been lifted, use of Minnan has grown steadily in all contexts, and anyone eager for election had better be able to use it in campaign speeches. Linguistically, it is related to Mandarin about in the same way as Swedish is related to German, i.e. both descended from a common ancestor language.

each side of the Taiwan Strait,” his proposals for referenda, a new constitution, etc. all served to reinforce his stance as defender of the Taiwan identity.

In addition, Chen’s campaign methodically worked to increase the votes for him and assigned numerical targets to the various regions on Taiwan’s political map. In geographic terms, to win he needed to (1) do well in Southern Taiwan – the DPP’s traditional stronghold; (2) hold on in northern and central Taiwan – the Pan-Blue’s stronghold; and (3) make inroads into the Hakka communities which had supported the KMT in the past.³ As it turned out, among Taiwan’s 25 local administrative divisions (counties/cities), the Pan-Blue won 13 (many sparsely populated), and the DPP won 12 (including several of the most populous counties). Since the electoral system of Taiwan’s presidential election is first-past-the-post with the entire country as one single constituency, rather than the American-style electoral college, the more populous counties and cities that went to the DPP’s column helped catapult Chen to victory.

In contrast to the superior strategy and charismatic candidate of the DPP campaign, the Pan-Blue ticket suffered from older, weaker candidates (Lien was 69 and Soong was 61 – in contrast to the 53-year-old Chen), and many voters saw them as more interested in regaining power than enacting reforms. Composed of two parties cooperating uneasily, the campaigns seemed uncoordinated and platforms failed to excite the imagination. For example, the Pan-Blue ticket chose not to publish a white paper on cross-strait relations because anything that could achieve consensus approval from both KMT and PFP would probably be attacked as pro-China by Chen. Nor could Pan-Blue get traction with their claims that Chen’s harping on Taiwanese identity was dividing the community.

Another factor was that when former KMT President Lee Teng-hui joined the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU), a DPP campaign ally, he brought with him some of his previous KMT supporters, who now voted for Chen.

Finally, there was the unexpected X-factor. In 2000, the last-minute endorsement by Dr. Lee Yuan-tse, a Nobel Laureate and President of Academia Sinica, added 3-5 percent of the votes for Chen. This time, the election-eve wounding of President Chen and Vice President Lu by gunshots at a campaign rally appeared to have added quite a few “sympathy votes” to Chen’s margin.

3. The Hakka are an ethnic group distinct in language and culture from the Minnan-speaking Taiwanese, but their ancestors also migrated to Taiwan from the mainland in the 18th and 19th centuries. Though relatively small in numbers compared to their neighbors, whether on Taiwan, the mainland, or in Southeast Asia, the Hakka have contributed many of the 20th Century’s Chinese leaders including Sun Yat-sen, Deng Xiaoping, Lee Teng-hui, Lee Kuan Yu.

Meanwhile, the two referenda failed, as they did not reach the legal quorum (50 percent of all eligible voters).⁴ But it should be noted that among those who picked up the referenda ballots, about 92 percent voted *yes*. Although the defeat of the referenda reduced Chen's luster somewhat, he gained by establishing them as an important precedent. The defeat also gave Beijing a partial victory, because the referenda, which Beijing feared would set a precedent for declaration of Taiwan independence, did not succeed.

Implications of the Election

The election entails far-reaching implications for both Taiwan's domestic politics and external relations. Chen's campaign secured an improbable victory, but it also deeply divided the society and led to a very nervous international community. Taiwan's young democracy is being tested. That Pan-Blue still complains about plots and a "stolen election," casts a shadow over Taiwan's democratic consolidation.

The full domestic impact of the election may not be felt until after the December 2004 Legislative Yuan elections. As Table 2 shows, the KMT's share of parliamentary seats has steadily declined over the last five elections. The DPP and its ally TSU currently hold but 40 percent of the seats in the current legislature. If the DPP-TSU alliance can gain a comfortable majority in December, it will certainly reduce the gridlock that is said to hamper DPP performance. Meanwhile, the New Party (NP) and Soong's People's First Party (PFP) have agreed in principle to rejoin the KMT, though details remain to be worked out.

Table 2 : Legislative Yuan Seat Shares After Elections (Percentages)

Party	1989	1992	1995	1998	2001
KMT	60.8	53.0	46.1	46.4	28.6
DPP	28.3	31.0	33.2	29.6	33.4
NP			13.0	7.1	2.6
PTF					
TSU					
Others*	10.9	16.0	7.8	17.0	

* Small parties and independents

Source: Central Election Commission data.

4. The texts of the two referenda were: (1) The People of Taiwan demand that the Taiwan Strait issue be resolved through peaceful means. Should Mainland China refuse to withdraw the missiles it has targeted at Taiwan and openly renounce the use of force against us, would you agree that the Government should acquire more advanced anti-missile weapons to strengthen Taiwan's self-defense capability? And (2) Would you agree that our Government should engage in negotiations with Mainland China on the establishment of a "peace and stability" framework for cross-strait interactions in order to build consensus for the welfare of the people on both sides?

The Pan-Blue alliance, originally formed to defeat the common enemy, but now likely to recombine into a broader KMT, faces an uncertain future. Will Lien and Soong step aside in favor of younger leaders such as Taipei Mayor Ma Ying-jiou and Legislative Yuan Speaker Wang Chin-ping, who stand a better chance against the DPP? And will the party merger drive "the Light Blues" (moderate Taiwanese still within the KMT alliance) toward the DPP or TSU?

Looking Ahead

With Chen reelected, and free from pressure for reelection since he cannot run again, the question became would he push ahead to try to make his constitutional referendum proposal his legacy.

In the days following his March election, this prospect caused deep concern in the U.S., China, and other countries in the Western Pacific, such as Japan. The fear, of course, was that rash post-election statements or actions by Chen could trigger military action by the PRC, which in turn would most likely lead to U.S. military intervention.

In the most explicit exercise of "preventive diplomacy" regarding Taiwan, the U.S. got tough with Taipei in the weeks prior to Chen's inauguration on May 20. In Congressional testimony of April 21, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James A. Kelly warned, "Our efforts at deterring Chinese coercion might fail if Beijing ever becomes convinced Taiwan has embarked on a course toward independence and permanent separation from China, and concludes that Taiwan must be stopped in these efforts." He also said that the U.S. strongly supports Taiwan's democracy, though it does not support Taiwan independence: "A unilateral move toward independence will avail Taiwan of nothing it does not already enjoy" and could destroy Taiwan's hope for the future. Kelly also characterized PRC's strong statements as "empty threats" and "irresponsible."

On May 17, just three days before Chen's inauguration for a second term, the PRC's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) issued a stern statement, warning that China would "thoroughly crush" any plot to split Taiwan from China. But it also dangled incentives, regarding transport, air traffic, telecommunications, military confidence building, and Taiwan's "international space." All were conditioned upon accepting Beijing's "one China" principle, something Taiwan cannot do since it would make the island republic into just one of the PRC's provinces. The U.S. condemned the bellicose language of threat of use of force, but also claimed to see positive elements.

All eyes therefore focused on Chen's May 20 inaugural speech.

In that speech, titled "Paving the Way for a Sustainable Taiwan,"

Chen addressed many of the U.S. concerns and moved to ease tensions with China. Stressing peace, reconciliation, and the need for pragmatic steps to improve ties between the two sides, the speech was in sharp contrast to the harsher tone Chen adopted in the months before his narrow March reelection. Instead of fulfilling his pledge to replace Taiwan's constitution, adopted by the Chiang Kai-shek government in 1947 in China, with one he would seek to have sanctioned by referendum in 2006, he proposed a constitutional reengineering project, which would be aimed at improving governance and would exclude issues related to sovereignty, territory, or independence. Saying he would "not exclude any possibility" concerning future relations, he reaffirmed the "principles and pledges" unveiled in his 2000 inaugural speech – implying a continuation of the policy of not declaring independence, changing the country's formal name or flag, etc., always provided China refrains from the use of force. Chen went even so far as to say he understood the historic context and reasons for Beijing's insistence on a "One China Principle" – though he could not to accept it as the precondition for talks. The U.S. called Chen's remarks "responsible and constructive," creating "an opportunity" for Taipei and Beijing to restore dialogue.

In its first official response to Chen's speech, China's Taiwan Affairs Office spokesman Zhang Mingqing said that Beijing fell back on saying it would pay more attention to what Chen actually does than what he says. Zhang also accused Chen of being the root cause of tensions in the Taiwan Strait by his failure to accept "the one China principle." But these rather hackneyed words essentially constitute a place holder while the PRC leadership ponders its course. With Chen being both moderate and looking toward accommodation, and with Washington well satisfied with his words, can Beijing afford to remain completely intransigent?

Right after Chen won reelection, gloom permeated Beijing's agencies dealing with Taiwan affairs. Many government-linked scholars argued that reunification could henceforth only be achieved through non-peaceful means. Premier Wen recently disclosed that China was "seriously considering" enacting a *Unification Law*, which would legally mandate the use of force if Taiwan is perceived to be permanently separating from China. Despite these strong words, China seems to feel that its strategy of enlisting the U.S. to rein in Chen has achieved results. Thus, China will not take any immediate military action. For the foreseeable future, China's main concern will be to prevent Taiwan from declaring independence, rather than accomplishing unification. However, its policy of using military modernization and missile build-up to put pressure on Taiwan will continue.

Continued "Muddling Through"

The geopolitical tensions caused by the growth of democracy in Taiwan hides the fact that although each side of the U.S.-China-Taiwan triangle talks of "maintaining the status quo," each pursues a different version of the concept. There is a phrase for this in Chinese: Same bed, different dreams.

China interprets the status quo to mean that there is only one China, Taiwan is a province of that China; and thus Beijing owns sovereignty over Taiwan. Deploying missiles against a "renegade province" is an exercise of "sovereign right" – an "internal affair" and no other nation can interfere. But at the same time as it insists that Taiwan is an internal affair, it now consistently calls on Washington to intervene in that "internal affair" and constrain Taiwan.

Taiwan's DPP sees the status quo as meaning Taiwan is already an independent nation, one that never has been ruled by the PRC. But even if it is not necessary for Taiwan to declare the independence it holds already, the DPP recognizes its economic dependence upon China and its military dependence on the U.S. As for the KMT, it no longer is clear just what it believes. Its last president, Lee Teng-hui, once said Taiwan and the mainland had a "special state-to-state relationship," analogous to that between West and East Germany, before the latter's collapse.

To regain U.S. control over cross-strait relations, in his April 21 testimony before the House International Relations Committee, Assistant Secretary Kelly asserted that the U.S. does not support unilateral moves that would change the status quo "as we define it" (emphasis added):

For Beijing, this means no use of force or threat to use force against Taiwan. For Taipei, it means exercising prudence in managing all aspects of cross-strait relations. For both sides, it means no statements or actions that would unilaterally alter Taiwan's status.

Although in the January 1, 1979 communiqué recognizing the PRC as the sole legal government of China, the U.S. acknowledged the Chinese position that Taiwan was a part of China, the U.S. stated no position of its own. Indeed Washington has carefully avoided taking a position as to Taiwan's status ever since the early 1950s, when President Truman dispatched the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait and declared that Taiwan's status was unsettled.

Washington's obsession with maintaining the status quo, without taking into account new realities on the ground (e.g., Taiwan's democratic development and new national identity), exemplified by

Kelly's formula, reflects a desire to continually manage, rather than resolve, the Taiwan issue. Indeed, in assurances given Taiwan's former president Chiang Ching-kuo back in 1982, President Reagan said the United States had no intention of attempting to mediate between Taipei and Beijing; nor would it urge Taiwan to negotiate with the PRC. The basic idea has been that it is up to the parties to decide on a solution, if indeed there is to be a solution. Pending that outcome, the U.S. will continue to argue against unilateral change. And if need be, under the terms of the *Taiwan Relations Act* (Public Law 96-8), it will supply Taiwan with defensive arms and would regard any attempt to coerce Taiwan militarily as a threat to international peace and security and "a matter of grave concern" to the United States.

However much it wishes to see the present status quo continue, U.S. policy makers must realize that self-determination is a natural external extension of democracy. Taiwan's elections as a nation building process will continue. And the panoply of democracy, as we have seen it in our own country, often means taking positions and making utterances that offend overseas audiences even as they appeal to local constituencies. Equating democratization with Taiwanization and Desinification may well have adverse security implications, but Taiwan's identity-formation is a work in progress, in which "Chineseness" plays an integral and not necessarily positive part. This requires Beijing to differentiate between "cultural China," of which Taiwan can be a part, and "political China," which Taiwan can also belong – but only through free choice.

About the Author

VINCENT WEI-CHENG WANG is Associate Professor of Political Science and Program Coordinator of International Studies at the University of Richmond. This article draws upon the author's interviews in Taiwan March 4-14, 2004, and a talk he gave at the symposium "The Impact of the 2004 Taiwan Presidential Election" at Harvard University on April 8, 2004.